

A diachronic study of grammatical tone in northwestern Bantu

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Tone in Bantu languages: There is considerable variation among the around 500 Bantu languages with respect to tone systems, ranging from fully tonal languages (e.g. Kikuyu) to non-tonal languages (e.g. Swahili) and a “bewildering variety of intermediate types” (Clements & Goldsmith 1984). Meeussen (1967) reconstructs Proto-Bantu with two tonemes: H and L, which are associated with vowels and syllabic nasals. Synchronically, Bantu languages vary a great deal in the nature of their tonal systems and the functions that tone encodes, despite some common themes such as tonal inventories and processes or functional domains. While there is a decent amount of reconstruction accomplished for lexical tone in Bantu (Meeussen 1967, Hyman & Katamba 1990, Marlo & Odden 2019) and, more broadly, Niger-Congo (Hyman 2016a), grammatical tone and its historical changes is vastly understudied.

Grammatical tone in northwestern Bantu: Northwestern (NW) Bantu languages show significant differences from PB and synchronic Bantu languages of other areas (South, East, and West). They are often reported to distinguish L, H and \emptyset TBUs and exhibit similar tonal processes (floating tones, high tone spreading). However, “the nature of these [tonal] systems as a whole is not well understood” (Odden & Bickmore, 2014: 3). Reasons for that include the fact that i) distinctive tones are still left out of some descriptions or only described for certain parts of the grammar, ii) there is a bias towards eastern Bantu languages in tone descriptions, which have very different tonal systems, and iii) we are still lacking an investigative framework to collect and compare tonal data, with the result that data is not complete and/or comparable (but see Marlo 2013).

In this talk, I investigate an important tonal feature that is common in NW Bantu, namely grammatical H tones in the verb phrase. These floating H tones share similar targets across languages of the area (subject markers, the finite verb, phrase-medial verb position, object noun class prefixes) and surface under similar conditions, often determined by certain tense/aspect/mood categories. Tonal phenomena of H tones in this domain have been described in the literature under differing terms in different Bantu areas, including “metatony” in NW Bantu (Hyman & Lionnet 2011), a “conjoint/disjoint distinction” in eastern and southern Bantu (Hyman 2016b), and “tone-case” in western Bantu (Kavari et al. 2012, Van der Wal 2015). It is, however, unclear how they developed historically. Based on data from the literature on NW Bantu languages (e.g. Bakweri, Basaa, Abo, Mpiemo, Kwasio, Eton) and my own fieldwork on Gyeli (Grimm 2021), I propose that tonal change in NW Bantu is largely driven by changes in phonology (segmental loss and constraints on syllable numbers) and interrelated morphological complexity. In languages where grammatical tone is a co-phonology of segmental material, e.g. a tense marker, its functional load is relatively weak and it is often not clear what tone contributes to the meaning or functional category. In contrast, when segmental material erodes and only the tone survives, tone takes on a higher functional load and may develop into entirely tonal paradigms to distinguish functional categories. Such an extreme case is found in Gyeli (Grimm, forthcoming).

Advances in the understanding of GT and its historical dimension will not only shed light on patterns in tone system changes, but also contribute to current unknowns, such as quantifying a language as to the degree to which it employs grammatical tone (Rolle 2018), identifying the exact range of grammatical functions tone can encode, areas of grammar where tone carries more grammatical functions than in others, and identifying grammatical categories and sub-categories that are expected to be marked tonally in Bantu languages.

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